

Strong libraries = strong societies: democratizing access to knowledge through libraries

Päivikki Karhula

Sinikka Sipilä, Secretary General of the Finnish Library Association, will become IFLA President for the next two-year term, beginning at the IFLA Conference in Singapore August 2013 and closing at the IFLA Conference in Africa. Prior to this she will continue to serve as IFLA President-Elect. Sipilä's motto for her presidential term "Strong libraries = strong societies: democratizing access to knowledge through libraries" emphasizes libraries as a force for supporting openness and equality in a society.

Becoming a president of an international organization will change Sipilä's work significantly – Mostly this is going to be strategic work, advocating libraries and certain selected issues, lobbying and speaking for these key issues in different meetings and conferences around the world.

Openness and equality

Sipilä has several years of experience as a member of the IFLA Governing Board. Right now, she has been involved in planning the IFLA Helsin-

ki Conference for last two years. The Conference is a remarkable big event even for the Helsinki Exhibition & Convention Centre hosting the biggest conference to be held there during 2012.

How she feels about working for IFLA in a next presidential term?

- It's been really interesting to participate on the library conferences e.g. in Moscow, Vilnius, Norrköping and Hamburg and get to know my new colleagues, underlines Sinikka Sipilä. - I have been involved now in many discussions and heard

presentations of such library issues, which will be useful for the coming years for my work in IFLA. These issues include e.g. long term storage of digital data, electronic resources, development of the work and recruiting of new members to library associations.

The motto for Sipilä's presidential term is "Strong libraries – strong societies: democratizing access to knowledge through libraries" emphasizing lib-

raries as a force for supporting openness and equality in society. - Libraries provide free information resources and tools for searching and processing information. However, their open and public space, which has significance as a meeting place and learning space for their users, is a valuable asset for people as well, states Sipilä.

Value of library space

For each term every IFLA President needs to define a theme for key policies and strategic issues. Sipilä's strategy consists of three main issues: *access* or information related rights and access on information, *inclusion* or balancing acts to the social problems due to financial crisis e.g. exclusion and *profession* or advancing professional skills and competencies and the work of national library associations, especially in developing countries.

- The value of libraries as an open and public space and a learning space should be noticed, especially now that libraries tend to favor more and more electronic resources, e-books and the internet. Digitization and networked resources can replace books, underlines Sipilä. - However, if devices and library space are lost, for users they may be an irreplaceable asset.

The value of libraries may also increase due to the global financial crisis. During the periods of economic instability, libraries are heavily used: their open resources and public space becomes elementary and supports a sense of community. And if social conflicts in society might become heated, libraries would act as a balancing force.

Decreasing the digital divide

The significance of the library space for users and community has become clear for Sipilä in several projects in developing countries which she has participated and supported through the Fin-

nish Library Association. The most successful and long-standing projects include development co-operation with Namibian and South African libraries as partners.

Development co-operation are emphasized during Sipilä's IFLA presidential term. – In ongoing Finnish development projects in Namibia and Tanzania the focus is on training and capacity building. Our aim is to decrease the digital divide, Sipilä describes. - Women and unemployed are our special targets; libraries could support them by providing information on employment and health care. IT training is also provided to support local entrepreneurs.

Finns are library lovers

Finnish librarians have been active at IFLA already for more than 80 years – since 1927. Presently, they are also active in about 30 sections and committees.

And at the IFLA 2012 Conference there will be more than 200 volunteers to give support in various tasks. Sipilä has two personal assistants for her during the Conference. - It is going to be busy, and helping hands are necessary to co-ordinate communication and activities, states Sipilä.

And emphasizing the significance of libraries is a correct statement, especially in Finland: Finns are library lovers. Libraries are the most heavily used cultural services in Finland and about 80% of Finns are regular library users. 📖

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